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SUBJECT: VIETNAM'S CENTRAL COAST PROVINCES REBOUND IN THE AFTERMATH
OF TYPHOON MIRINAE

REF: HANOI 1082

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[11](#). (SBU) Subject: Officials in Khanh Hoa and Binh Dinh gave themselves high marks for their preparation and response to Typhoon Mirinae, which hit Vietnam's south central coast on November 2. Perhaps rightly so, because ConGen HCMC's December 9-11 visit to the region found life has effectively returned to normal, even in Phu Yen province where officials were too busy to meet with foreigners because of the cleanup effort. Provincial leaders blamed global warming for a greater number of unpredictable storms and are currently implementing GVN's national target plan to establish climate change adaptation and mitigation measures. Mirinae underscores another interesting provincial dynamic; local leaders said that when a national mandate contradicts local reality in an emergency, it's every province for itself. Provincial leaders noted they used U.S. Navy website forecasts during the emergency, and appealed to the U.S. for further disaster response assistance, particularly technical assistance, providing equipment necessary for rapid response and training. End Summary.

[12](#). (U) Typhoon Mirinae hit nine provinces in the center of Vietnam on November 2, with Phu Yen, Binh Dinh, and Khanh Hoa enduring the heaviest damage. The storm claimed the lives of around 123 Vietnamese and stranded thousands more. Nearly 50,000 houses were damaged by flooding, of which more than 2,000 collapsed. Through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the United States provided \$250,000 to the International Federation of the Red Cross to fund basic emergency relief items such as blankets, water containers, cooking pots, mosquito nets, soap, and water purification tablets to more than 28,000 people who were badly affected by the typhoon. This assistance followed \$750,000 in USAID support to victims of Typhoon Ketsana (reftel) that slammed into Vietnam's central provinces in late September.

The Anatomy of Storm Preparation

[13](#). (SBU) The Steering Committee of each provincial Flood

Prevention Committee is headed by the Vice Chairman of the People's Committee while the DARD Director is managing head and oversees the other 22 agencies on the steering committee. Within the committee is a Standing Office, which acts as an "advisor" to the Steering Committee, looks at various prevention activities and technical expertise, and communicates with the national flood prevention committee. This structure is replicated at the district and communal levels.

¶4. (SBU) Mr. Nguyen Thai Nhu Tri, managing director of Binh Dinh's flood management authority said that when a storm is 300-500 kilometers away, the Steering Committee holds a meeting to develop an action plan based on the latest forecast, which usually includes calling fishing boats back to shore, evacuating residents in high risk areas, removing high cranes or things that can fall and installing sandbags. When the storm is 50 kilometers offshore, the Steering Committee gives specific taskings that include moving elderly and children, mobilizing military and volunteer forces and putting four "on-the-spots" in place: a commander, rescue forces, transportation, and relief logistics.

¶5. (SBU) According to the managing director of Khanh Hoa's flood management authority, Mr. Dao Cong Thien, one other important tasking before a major storm is to have a plan for release of water from hydropower plants and irrigation reservoirs. Khanh Hoa has one hydropower plant and before Typhoon Mirinae Mr. Thien said he personally went to the reservoir twice to check procedures for the water level and held inter-reservoir meetings with managers downstream to assure cooperation; he forced them to release water to allow a place for it to go if heavy rains forced the hydropower plant to release. Although Mr. Thien highlighted his vigilance in this regard, he did not fault the

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managers of the Ba Ha power plant in Phu Yen province, who media have criticized for an emergency water release that led to additional flooding, saying they did the best they could under historically heavy rains.

Self-Criticism, Vietnam Style

¶6. (SBU) Binh Dinh's flood prevention director said he would rate the province's response to Typhoon Mirinae on a scale of one to ten as an eight or nine after taking into consideration the resources available and the extremity of the storm. The lessons he learned are to never refuse offers of assistance even if they don't have their intended effect, as every effort will boost morale; also, he underscored the need to increase the capacity of local people, citing former Party Secretary Nguyen Van Linh: "We have to save ourselves before God does." Mr. Thien, on the other hand, gave Khanh Hoa a perfect 10 score on his province's performance, noting his personal involvement with the reservoirs and the rapid decision to send military battalion to the north of the province as soon as the storm hit Phu Yen.

¶7. (SBU) When faced with the choice between following national Steering Committee dictate or making their own choices, authorities in both provinces stated that the People's Committee Chairman's first responsibility is to the people of his province and thus must act in accordance with those needs. For example, after it became clear that Phu Yen would be the worst impacted by Mirinae, the national flood prevention steering committee directed Khanh Hoa to send eight emergency boats to their neighbor for assistance, but the province refused in case they were needed for its own relief efforts. Similarly, because the

Steering Committee only receives national weather forecasts updates every six hours after being vetted through Hanoi, authorities depend on outside "unofficial" updates, including the U.S. Navy's website, which both groups cited as the "best."

Provinces Believe Climate Change at Work in Worsening Storms

18. (SBU) Provincial officials were eager to frame recent storms in a greater context of global warming. Mr. Thien said that storms in the central region of Vietnam had become more frequent, more severe and, most notably, more unpredictable in the last ten years. Whereas storms of the past would typically begin in the Pacific, travel over the Philippines into the South China Sea and then traverse a steady course into Vietnam, now there are more storms that are forming directly in the South China Sea and can suddenly shift direction without warning. There are also more storms going directly down the coast from north to south. During Typhoon Mirinae, weather updates were frequent and accurate, but leaders were taken back by the sheer amount of rain dumped on the province in a flash flood. Binh Dinh Flood Prevention expressed similar surprise - the storm itself was manageable, but the 70 centimeters that were dumped in the aftermath and unprecedented flooding that followed posed a greater challenge.

19. (SBU) Mr. Thien said that while he is not an expert on climate change, he does know about Vietnam's National Target Program (NTP) to set overall targets for adaptation and mitigation to climate change. As part of the program, each province creates its own detailed plan and Khanh Hoa has already submitted its plan to the central government. As part of the NTP, GVN has also selected eight provinces as pilot projects to establish "best practices." Mr. Thien was critical of this approach because all eight of the provinces chosen are poor with weak preparedness programs, and he would never want to look to them as a guide for what should be done in Khanh Hoa. He gave the example of Quang Ngai that had received and used foreign funding to build a safe house, and had no money left over to buy

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what is most important: equipment. In his opinion a better approach would be to choose as models four provinces with inadequate systems and four with strong systems, like Khanh Hoa.

Comment:

110. (SBU) Driving through the provinces most affected by flooding in the aftermath of Typhoon Mirinae, damage from the storm was not readily visible. This is either testament to effective relief efforts -- giving credibility to the provincial Steering Committee's high self-evaluation scores -- or due to the fact that the worst hit areas are farther inland and off the beaten path. Despite little evidence of flooding damage, Phu Yen authorities refused to meet with EconOff, citing that they were "too busy dealing with floods." That same week Phu Yen authorities also refused to meet with Canadian Embassy officials, who wanted to check up on how \$800,000 they'd donated for Mirinae disaster relief was being spent. Other provincial leaders, however, appealed for U.S. technical capacity and equipment to assist in managing future storms, or at least advice on the best equipment to purchase, so that they can become even more effective in the face of worsening future storms and flooding.

110. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.
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